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ABSTRACT

The preliminary work of the Scottish "School-Based Assessment of Communicative Foreign-Language Skills in Secondary Classes 3 and 4" to train teachers to undertake increased testing responsibilities under recent educational reforms is explained. The models of communicative competence and performance being developed for use with classroom teachers are presented. An account is given of the foreign language assessment practices observed and the evaluation of the data in terms of the extent to which the assessment practices currently in use appear to elicit evidence about pupils' communicative foreign language proficiency. The general pattern of oral testing, including test management, scoring, examiner behavior, and the dimensions of communicative performance being tested, observed during preliminary visits to six cooperating schools and the attitudes of teachers concerning the teaching and assessment of communicative skills are described. The future action research strategy of the project is also outlined. (Author/MSE)

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DEVELOPING CLASSROOM TEACHERS' ASSESSMENT SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This paper contains a preliminary presentation of the work of a research project entitled "The School-Based Assessment of Communicative Foreign-Language Skills in Secondary Classes 3 and 4". The project, which is funded by the Scottish Education Department is currently being carried out in the Department of Education at the University of Stirling. The models of communicative competence and performance being developed for use with classroom teachers are presented. The general pattern of testing observed during preliminary visits to six cooperating schools is described and also the views currently held by teachers concerning the teaching and assessment of communicative skills. The future action research strategy of the project is also outlined.

The other members of the research team are R.F. Mitchell, R.M. Johnstone and D. Kent. I would like to thank them for their help and support in the preparation of this paper.

INTRODUCTION: SCOTTISH REFORMS AT 16+

The question of the role of the classroom teacher as assessor is one which has been receiving increased attention in Scotland in the past few years as a result of reforms which are taking place in the Scottisch system of assessment and certification for 16-year-olds. In 1977 the Munn and Dunning Committees reported on curriculum and assessment respectively in the third and fourth years of secondary education in Scotland. Since then have followed feasibility studies, government implementation proposals and pilot studies, with the result that the reform is well under way. New assessment and certification procedures in English, Maths and Science will be introduced in 1986; certification in French is planned for 1987 and in German and Spanish for 1988. This means that the present secondary class 2 (S2) who are learning French will be taking the new "Standard Grade" examination as will those pupils in S1 who are learning German or Spanish (although there are few of them as these languages are usually started as a second language in S3).

The Munn/Dunning programme has several significant features. The first is that the "Standard Grade" examinations will provide syllabuses and certification for all pupils at the age of 16, whereas the present "Ordinary Grade" (O Grade) examinations are intended for the more "academic" pupils only. This is being done through the drafting of syllabuses at three levels (Foundation, General and Credit). Secondly, the introduction of limited performance descriptions (called "Grade Related Criteria")

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alongside the award of numerical grades represents a partial shift from norm-referenced towards criterion-referenced assessment. The third main feature, and this is the one that concerns us in this paper, is that classroom teachers will be required to take on significantly increased responsibilities in the summative assessment and certification of pupils' FL performance, which has historically been the exclusive role of the Scottish Examination Board.

Joint Working Parties have been set up in the various subject areas to make implementation proposals based on the government recommendations. The Modern Languages Joint Working Party, which first met in October 1982, published its report in June of this year. The proposals contained therein represent a significant response to criticism that the present "O" Grade FL examination shows a one-sided concern with learnes' mastery of the formal target language system, and, in particular, that it neglects oral communication skills. The proposed new scheme places much increased emphasis on oral/aural skills (the only test of writing will be optional), and is concerned to make communicative effectiveness a significant criterion in assessing pupils' FL performance. In addition, substantial responsibility for the conduct of assessment (especially of the speaking test which is to account for 50 % of the total mark) will be devolved under the new scheme to the classroom teachers themselves.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The "School-Based Assessment of Communicative Foreign-Language Skills in S3 and S4 project was funded as part of a special research programme in parallel with the Munn/Dunning development programme, and runs from November 1983 to October 1986. The project has three main aims: a) to develop a set of criteria for the assessment of pupils' communicativie performance, which will be both theoretically well-founded, and usable by teachers for assessment of their pupils' FL proficiency, under "normal" classroom conditions; b) to develop quidelines for the consistent administration by teachers of oral interview tasks, having the main characteristics of "real life" communicative speech events; and c) to study the place of formative assessment in "communicative" instructional strategies at intermediate levels. These three areas are being investigated by means of an action research programme involving collaboration between the research team and teachers of French, German and Spanish working with S3/S4 pupils (i.e. 14 - 16 year-old pupils) in secondary schools in Central Scotland.

Teachers working in six schools have agreed to become involved in the research project, and as a preliminary to a series of focussed action research studies dealing with these assessment issues, a number of familiarisation visits to these schools have been carried out by members of the research team. The visits have involved interviews with all FL teachers in the schools concerned, plus unstructured observation of teaching and assessment from S2 to S4 (with a main focus on S3). For the

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research team, these visits were a necessary preliminary to more focussed work on assessment issues; given the classroom based, collaborative nature of the research design, thorough familiarisation with the curriculum and methodology forming the current context for classroom assessment practices was essential. Moreover, they have also provided a unique record of the nature of FL teaching and testing in the middle years of secondary schooling, at a time when teachers are still preparing pupils for the traditional O Grade examinations, though with increasing consciousness of the impending changes in syllabus and certification procedures.

THIS PAPER

The main part of this paper will provide an account of the FL classroom assessment practices observed during these familiarisation visits, in the Spring 1984. These data are evaluated in terms of the extent to which the assessment practices currently in use in cooperating departments appear to elicit evidence about pupils' communicative FL proficiency. A description will then be given of teachers' views concerning the teaching and assessment of communicative skills, as collected from interview data. Finally a short report will be made of a series of group discussions held by members of the research team and cooperating teachers concerning a definition of communicative competence. The paper will conclude with a presentation of some ideas for the action research investigations.

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND COMMUNICATIVE SPEECH EVENTS

The framework of FL communicative competence to which reference is being made in evaluating current practice at this stage of the project is that proposed by Canale (1983), a further development of that first put forward by Canale and Swain (1980). Canale indentifies four major components of communicative competence:

1. Grammatical competence (including phonology, orthography, vocabulary, word formation, sentence formation)

2. Sociolinguistic competence (expression and understanding of social meanings appropriate to different sociolinguistic contexts, and of grammatical forms appropriate for their expression)

3. Discourse competence (knowledge of different linguistic genres, together with their related devices for cohesion and coherence)

4. Strategic competence (ways of coping with grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and performance difficulties).

Acceptance of such a framework has implications for assessment as any assessment scheme or task must be such as to elicit performance data from the learner relevant to each different category of competence.

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Littlewood (1977) and Mitchell and Johnston (1981) have tried to specify the characteristics of classroom speech events likely to provide "communicative" experience for the learner, in this expanded sense. Morrow (1981) has similarly attempted to indentify salient features of communicative assessment tasks. From these different proposals can be derived a number of more or less directly observable characteristics of communicative FL speech events (relevant to oral, face-to-face interaction):

1. Unpredictability of FL utterances (and the absence of structural constraints on what is said)

2. "Newness" of information being conveyed

3. "Natural" turntaking (participants initiate etc. as appropriate to their real or simulated conversation role)

4. Message-related rather than form-related feedback from the learner's interlocutor.

Reference will be made to these criteria in considering the effectiveness of current classroom-based assessment tasks in eliciting communicative performance data from S3 learners.

ORAL TEST OBSERVATION

As part of the initial familiarisation process, special visits were made to all six schools to observe examples of the S3 end-of-term tests currently in use. These tests had been developed within the departments using them and were mostly conducted by the class teacher. Eleven testing sessions were observed: ten of these involved the use of tests modelled on the current O Grade Oral Proficiency examinations which the pupils concerned will be sitting in the summer of 1985 - eight on the so-called "Traditional" O Grade examination, two on the so-called "Alternative" O Grade, which takes place in the language laboratory. The remaining test observed was with a class who were not preparing for the 16+ examination. As the observer was unable to take a note of the pupils' responses recorded in the language laboratory, and as the test with the "non-certificate" class provided only an isolated example, comments will be confined to the face-to-face interview tests which were modelled on the Traditional O Grade.

The eleven sessions included tests of French, German and Spanish. Seventeen teachers were observed in total: 15 testing 91 pupils in face-to-face interview and two administering tests to 55 pupils in the language laboratory.

The aim of these observations was for the research team to gain a picture of the testing procedures being used in the cooperating schools so as to provide a context in which we could then carry out the interventionist action research phase. The next part of this paper will give a description of the test observations

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and look at how professionally and consistently teachers were operating and also at what in fact they were testing.

Test Format

The format of the test in four of the schools was modelled on the Traditional O Grade Oral Proficiency Tests. This test consists of four parts:

A. Reading Aloud
B. Answering Questions on a Picture
C. Answering General Questions
D. Role Playing

Each school had a selection of passages, pictures, general questions and role-play situations for use in the test but in each case it was the teacher/tester who chose which one the candidate should work from. There were, however, notable differences in the passages and the questions used by the various schools. The reading passages varied in length and type (i.e. whether prose or dialogue) and the range of tenses required to answer the questions went from the present tense only to present, past and future.

All but one of the departments used a role-play such as suggested in the SEB guidelines, providing testees with five printed instructions in English on a situation to be transposed by the pupils into the FL, the teacher being required to "respond appropriately". One department, with future developments in mind, provided pupils with three scenarios to prepare in advance. During the test, the teacher chose one and asked the pupil to engage in a free conversation, giving instructions such as "Do as much talking as you can", "This is a chance for you to show off". This was the only part of any test observed which was not discrete-point (excluding the Reading Aloud) and which lead to a more "natural" open-ended conversation.

Language of Test Management

Although all the teachers were following the same examination guidelines (which in fact make no explicit mention of the Language of Test Management), differences were noted in the approach of the various testers.

Six of the 17 teachers introduced and managed the test entirely in the FL. This was obviously seen by the testers concerned as comprising part of the test (even though this was not incorporated into the marking scheme.) Six testers used both L1 and the FL, tending to speak less English as the tests proceeded, thus providing varied experiences for the different testees. Five teachers introduced the test and gave all explanations in English. It was in fact this group which appeared the most concerned about putting the pupils at their ease and making quite sure they knew what they were supposed to be doing.

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Scoring

The four departments preparing pupils for the Traditional "O" Grade on the whole used the SEB (Scottish Education Board) guidelines for marking, both in terms of the marks to be given (sections A, B, C, D to be marked each out of 15) and the criteria for awarding of marks (i.e. a series of "bands" to describe Reading Aloud, and three marks per utterance in the other three sections with stipulations in sections B and C as to the use of finite verbs). The present SEB guidelines concerning the role-playing stipulate that each of the five single pre-structured utterances are to be impression marked on the basis of communication:

> Full communication achieved, plus full accuracy and/or idiomatic fluency of expression. 3 Marks.
>
> Full Communication achieved. 2 Marks.
>
> If in doubt as to full communication. 1 Mark.
>
> No Communication. 0 Marks.

The only department which chose global rather than discrete-point marking for the role-play devised its own pegged marking system based on task completion, mentioning such characteristics of communicative speech acts as fluency and willingness to initiate.

All 17 teachers wrote the marks for the Reading Aloud either during the reading or as soon as the pupil had finished. For the Questions on a Picture and the General Questions, teachers tried on the whole to write a mark immediately after the utterance. However, on occasions, a teacher would fall behind and then have to fill in all the marks retrospectively. Moreover, in the case of the set role-play, four out of the five teachers observed found they were unhappy writing a mark and playing their part simultaneously, so they filled in the mark retrospectively, again despite the fact that they had five discrete utterances to score. In the department working with scenarios, a global mark was registered retrospectively (in any case, all teachers in this school audio-recorded this part of the test for retrospective consideration and departmental discussion of the marking).

Tester Behaviour

Wide variations were noted in the way different testers elicited responses and prompted the testees. The SEB guidelines state that for sections B and C a pupil may ask for the repetition of a question without specific penalty within the time limit. Very few pupils in fact asked for repetition; most gave no linguistic response when the question was not understood. However, faced with silence, the majority of teachers were willing to repeat or rephrase the question a number of times even using paralinguistic means (for example, pointing to objects in the picture, or pointing to their watch to indicate time, out of the

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window to indicate weather). It was in fact felt that some teachers were so keen to get an immediate reaction that they were giving the testee little opportunity to think. Only two of the less experienced teachers stuck rigidly to the set question, repeating it loudly in the case of pupil non-response. Feedback offered by the tester varied from silence (accompanied by an obtrusive writing down of the mark) to a friendly response which often involved a repetition of the pupil's utterance (without the errors), suggestion of a word the pupils had been unable to find and a lead-in to the next question. In such cases the writing of the marks tended to be less obvious.

The variations in teacher behaviour during the tests can perhaps be partly explained by the apparent lack, in some cases at least, of departmental discussion on the question of test administration prior to the test.

Although some teachers made very obvious efforts to treat pupils consistently, the general impression gained by the observers was that individual teachers did react differently to different pupils, not only in the choice of picture/questions/role-play (on no occassion, as has already been mentioned, was there any evidence of pupil choice) but also in the feedback they offered. Tiredness may well have been a factor here. However, the evidence to support these impressions is only fragmentary and more empirical work needs to be done.

Dimensions of communicative performance being tested

What dimensions, then, of foreign language performance, were being tested in the observed oral tests? On the whole, the only component of communicative performance being tested in any systematic way was grammatical performance. Guidelines for the marking of the questions in sections B and C (Questions on a Picture and General Questions) lay stress upon grammatical accuracy, urging testers to watch for "serious errors". The testee throughout the test, then, was being mainly scored on his/her ability to compose a correct sentence (or an appropriate subordinate clause) in the target language. There was little scope for the testee to display extended discourse competence, as interaction was limited almost entirely to single-sentence questions followed by single-sentence answers. Nor was there evidence of reward being given for proof of competence in strategic repair on the part of the pupil. Instances of the latter were in any case rare, with only the occasional pupil uttering phrases such as: "je ne comprends pas ce mot", or "Pouvez-vous répéter la question, s'il vous plait?", and interlocutor behaviour designed to elicit them was not built systematically into the test tasks. Furthermore, in the area of sociolinguistic competence little account was taken of appropriacy, with pupils, for example, in the role-playing addressing coach-drivers and shop keepers as "tu". This is consistent with the Traditional O Grade guidelines for the Oral Proficiency Test, which state that: "The mode of address (formal or informal) to which the candidates are accustomed will be used." In fact, in one of the test batteries, one set of general questions contained both "tu" and "vous"

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forms, presumably to test whether the testee could comprehend both forms purely on a linguistic basis.

Only in the scenario-based role-play in the one department was there evidence of an attempt on the part of the testers to extend the boundaries of commucative performance being tested. As regards strategic repair, for example, the pupils, who had been told to try to keep the conversation going, showed willingness to use other words in place of the one they did not know or had forgotten (eg. one pupil said "No me gusta... la paella", when she wanted to say "la comida" and this was understood and picked up by the tester). A chance to cope with a longer, open-ended section of dialogue discourse was provided (the number of pupil utterances was in the region of 30 compared with 5 in the discrete-item test) as indeed was the opportunity to evince a basic knowledge of the rules of turn-taking. Appropriacy was also introduced into the test in the form of the different characters appearing in the role-plays (a young Spaniard whom pupils could address informally, and a waiter or a shop-keeper where the formal address was more appropriate). The open-ended nature of the role-play allowed for unpredictability, which was introduced on the part of the teacher when making an arrangement to meet someone (he announced he did not want to go to the beach because it was so boring) and also on the part of the pupil (who refused to buy the shoes the shop assistant was trying to press on her because she just did not like them). Finally "newness" of information was only really possible in an unscripted section of the test, therefore again in the scenario role-play. On the whole, then, one must conclude that only in this section of one of the tests was a wider definition of communicative competence in evidence.

Conclusion on Test Observations

The observations of the teaching and testing made by the research team seemed to reflect a broad consensus among teachers that what is teachable and testable in SJ is essentially grammatical competence in Canale's sense. In order to see how far this apparent consensus derived simply from the constraints of the present O Grade and how far teachers are in active agreement with this limited interpretation of communicative competence, it was decided to obtain a general survey of current teachers' views on curriculum and assessment by conducting interviews with the teachers in the cooperating departments.

INTERVIEWS

All teachers were approached and almost all agreed to be interviewed, making the total number 37. The transcripts have been analysed systematically, using a simple procedure of content analysis. The next section of this paper will give a general description of teachers' views on current patterns and future developments of FL teaching and assessment, with special reference to communication skills.

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The first striking point to emerge from the interviews was the predominance of the present O Grade examination in teacher thinking and teachers freely admitted to this. Their main aim at the present - and this forms the basis of their teaching and testing - is to enable as many pupils as possible to get through the 16+ examination. When asked, however, if they were satisfied with the examination, strong discontent was expressed, not only with the various sections of the test but also with its stress on formal accuracy rather than on the expression of meaning, and especially with its lack of concern with oral expression.

Indeed, the second area of consensus emerging from the interviews was the commitment of the teachers to oral work. A large number of them stated that the aim of teaching a foreign language should be "communication", which they defined in terms, for example, of "beign able to get over what you want to say and understanding what someone says to you", or "the ability to convey and receive information in the language". Far from stressing formal accuracy teachers spoke time and again of getting across the basic message, of the passing over of "real information". They did, however, anchor their definition in a situation, stating that at this level they would like their pupils to be able to "cope with" the sort of "survival" situation a tourist might meet with in the country where the language is spoken, although some teachers did add that they would also like their pupils to be able to talk about themselves and their own lives. In addition, teachers alluded to communicative speech events such as natural turntaking (and pupil initiation) and unpredictability.

When asked their views on assessment, teachers came down heavily on the side of some open-ended role-play or conversation, which they felt could test the various facets of communication they had spoken of. They were critical of the very discrete-point test they had been observed conducting. Another point which many of them made was that part of the oral assessment should be based on observation of pupils taking part in classroom communicative activities (some used the term "eaves-dropping"), and that a formal 15 minute test could not stand on its own as a valid test of a pupil's communicative ability.

Teachers, then, showed themselves to be well aware of the need to change assessment tasks and procedures if a reliable and valid test of pupils' communication skills was to be attempted. Indeed a lot of what they were moving towards in their interview responses appeared later in the Joint Working Party Report (June 1984). This has recommended that the oral mark be made up of a "series of speaking activities or tests which arise out of normal class work" (in S4) and a "formal test of speaking" based on the completion of various tasks, in which pupils are to be assessed on their "ability to tackle the development of the tasks and any associated conversational acitivities". So, even if the teachers interviewed are not yet clear as to how to integrate their own suggestion into tests which set out to assess communicative skills, it would appear that the majority of them are in tune with the direction the reforms at 16+ are taking.

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DISCUSSION OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK WITH THE TEACHERS

The next phase of the project involved discussing Canale's framework of communicative competence with the departments in the various schools, to see whether teachers accepted any or all of the components and whether they had additional suggestions to make. Up to the time of the writing of this paper, four schools have taken part in such discussions and the following section gives a brief report of these.

The general consensus on the subject of grammatical competence was that it was an important component but one that had been over-stressed in language teaching in the past. Explicit grammar teaching had its place but should come after the pupils had learnt to use the language. A number of teachers felt that those aspects of grammar which play a vital part in the communication process should take precedence over grammatical accuracy for its own sake.

Whereas teachers generally agreed that sociolinguistic competence was a vital component of communicative competence especially when a learner was in the foreign country, they were very hesitant about its playing too large a role in the teaching and especially the assessment process. The consensus was that at this stage, most pupils had too many other aspects of communication to concentrate on. Better to leave it for more advanced learners.

Discourse competence was a component that teachers again agreed was an important one, and one that they are becoming more aware of. The majority view, however, was that it was not so important at basic level and could be used as a means of differentiation between various levels of linguistic competence.

Strategic competence received general acclaim as to its importance in terms of keeping the conversation/communication going. It was also an area teachers feel could and should be integrated into the teaching and testing arrangements.

One other possible dimension of communicative competence (not included by Canale in his framework) which was discussed with the teachers was that of confidence and willingness to speak. The teachers on the whole spoke out strongly against integrating such aspect into the assessment scheme, while agreeing that they try to further them in the teaching process. However the Report of the Joint Working Party puts "Willingness to communicate" as a feature to be taken into account alongside "Language Used" in a consideration of "Differentiation by Candidate Performance". It states:

"A high level of performance will not be achieved without an extensive knowledge of the language, but factors other than such knowledge will be taken into account when evaluating candidates' performance: willingness to attempt to communicate, to interact in conversation, to take the initiative, to go beyond

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uniformly minimal responses, to accept some responsibility for sustaining the dialogue".

Although we have seen that teachers are keen for their pupils to learn to interact and take the initiative, they do share fears as to how the more shy candidate is going to fare under the new system.

On the whole, then, teachers have shown themselves to be well aware of the various components of communicative competence as suggested by Canale, and that they accept the role of each of them, the only reservations being with regard to what can be expected from the level of learner being considered by the project (S3 and S4).

CONCLUSION - THE NEXT PHASE OF THE PROJECT

The data collected during the test observation and the interviews and discussions with teachers provides much material on which to base the next phase of the research project - the series of small-scale action research studies for which researchers and classroom teachers will be jointly responsible. Possible areas of investigation and ones in which teachers have already expressed an interest would be, for example, the validity of the global conversation task, tester/interlocuter behaviour, inter-tester and intra-tester reliability and the scoring procedure. The project team look forward to teachers continuing to contribute ideas and suggestions concerning the identification of assessment needs of their classes and also concerning monitoring and cooperative evaluation of the tests they implement.

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